

My name is
Petar Babić
from the village of
Sovjak



by Aleksandar Saša Babić

Dedicated to the children of Kozara region

Graphic Novel

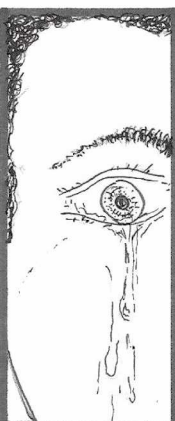
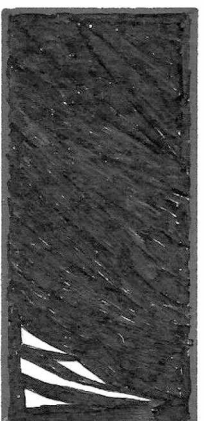
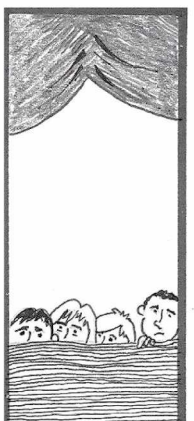
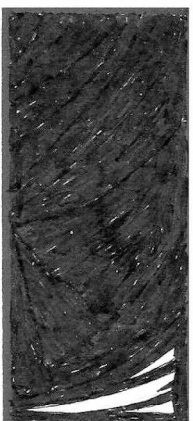
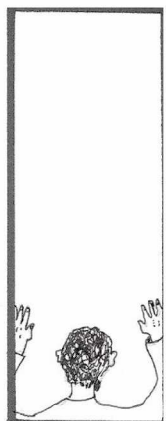
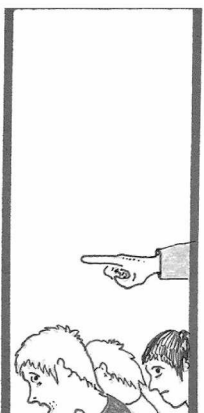
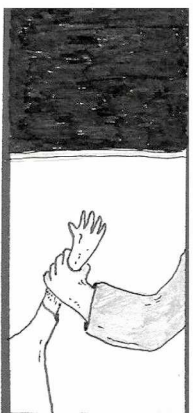
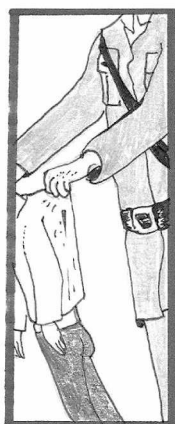
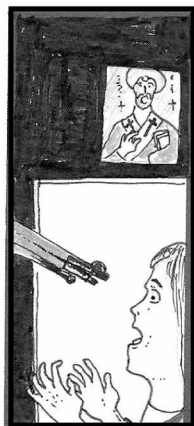
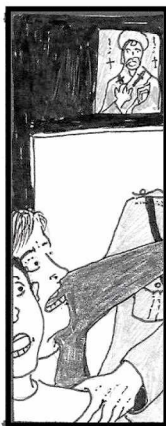
My Name is
Petar Babić
from the village of
Sovjak

By Aleksandar Babić



Your name is...







Soldiers came in the morning. They went from house to house. They took all of us kids from the village and hoarded us into trucks. Stevan my younger brother is in different truck, I wonder how's he doing. I think my Mom managed to hide our youngest baby Gojko at cousin's house just before soldiers came, don't know what happened to him. My friends faces were serious, worried, frightened... one of the soldiers, chubby loud guy, turned around, shouted at us. "Don't worry kids, you are going to be OK. You are heading towards the good place, you are all going to be nice Catholic children! "We just looked at each other, worried, afraid to say anything. Looking out of the truck I saw my mom, Jelena, running behind towards me. Her face serious, didn't cry, focused on me, just shouting, repeating, over and over again, like a chant, like a prayer:

"Your name is Petar Babić from the village of Sovjak!"

"Your name is Petar Babić from the village of Sovjak!"

"Your name is Petar Babić from the village of Sovjak!"

I was scared, wanted to cry and shout "Mom I love you!". But didn't.

I was afraid my friends will make fun of me.

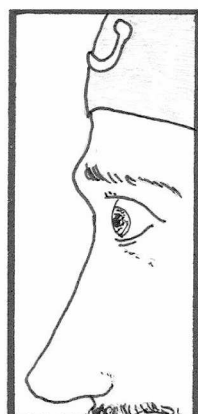
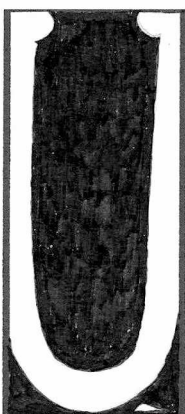
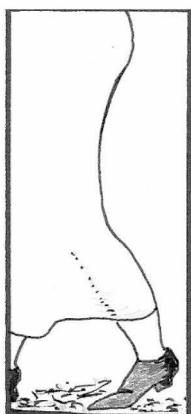
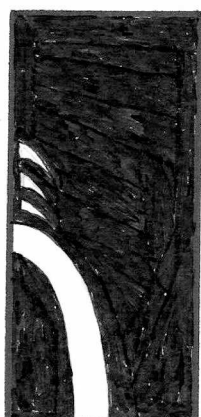
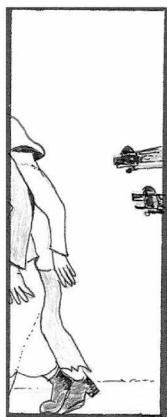
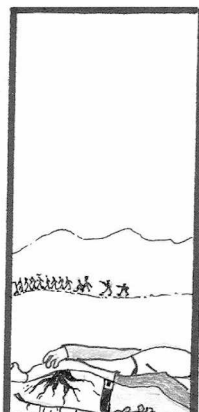
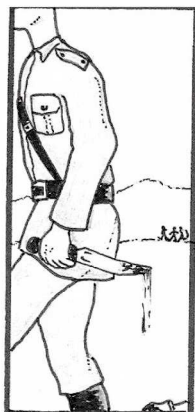
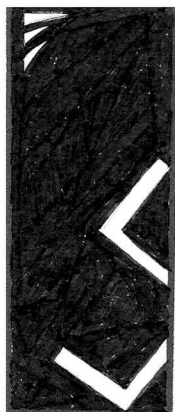
My name is Petar Babić from the village of Sovjak.

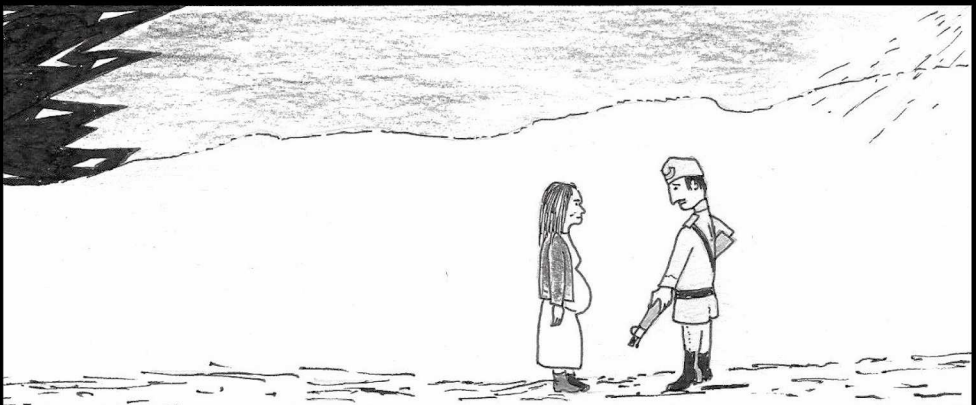
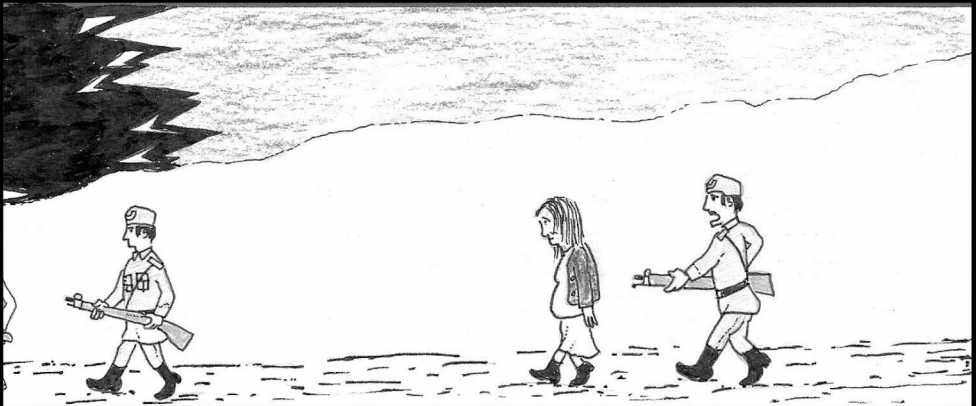
I'm 8 years old.



BITCH IS DEAD







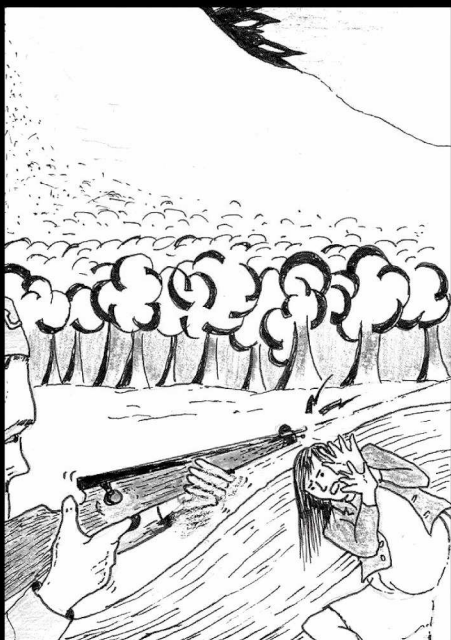
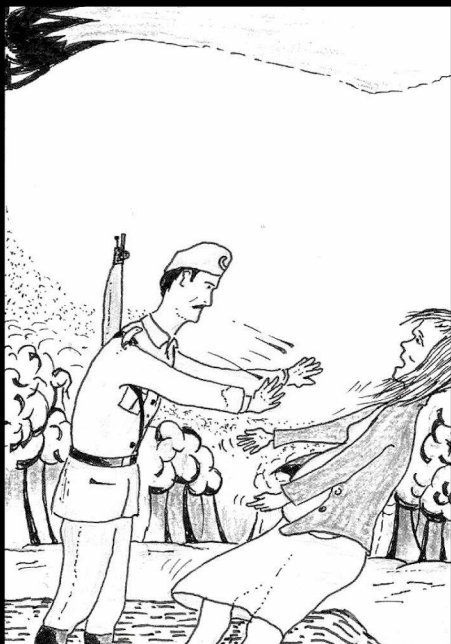
We have been walking for hours and hours. Road to Jasenovac concentration camp. I've heard...oh well, we've all heard about that horrible place.

Walking. Dragging my tired feet on the dirt road. We are all walking, hundreds of us in a column on the dirt road. Dirt is on our faces, on our clothes, in our soul. Our heads down, afraid to look at Ustaša soldiers that are walking beside us with guns aimed at our moving corpses. I'm praying to Lord.

...still walking. Why am I still here? Niko, my husband is dead. My sons, Petar, Stevan and Gojko gone. I don't know where they are. The little one in my big stomach is still with me ...I think.

Walking for hours and hours, losing my strength, falling behind. Ustaša soldiers are shouting at me that they'll shoot me if I don't hurry up. I have no strength, I have no fate, I have no...I just realized, I have no fear. I finally looked one of them in the eyes. I was not afraid any more. Wondering about who is he? Does he have children, women he loves, faith in God? He is the only one next to me. All the other soldiers and fellow Kozara folks move further ahead. He is avoiding my stare. Just quietly, almost asking me to move, not ordering any more "Come on let's go... Please". I can't walk any more. I stop. No more walking. He stops next to me. His head down now, avoiding to look me in the eyes.





Suddenly his already serious face goes dark, determined. He grabs me by the arm and drags me to the side of the road, pushes me into the ditch. Really strange, falling down, with this big stomach and tired body didn't hurt at all. It doesn't matter anymore. It's over.

He is above me, standing, looking me in the eyes for the first time. Serious face but not dark any more, almost soft, almost like asking for forgiveness. He gestures with his hand for me to keep my mouth shut. Then he aims his rifle at me or actually, wait a minute, it's not exactly at me. What is going on? Then he fires a bullet. I feel impact of the bullet hitting the ground, hitting the dirt next to me. I'm quiet. He looks me in the eyes one more time, then turns around, straps his rifle over his shoulder and shouts at his fellow soldiers.

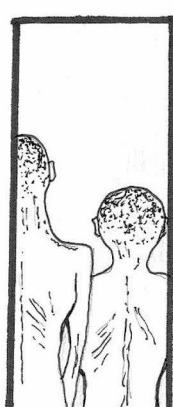
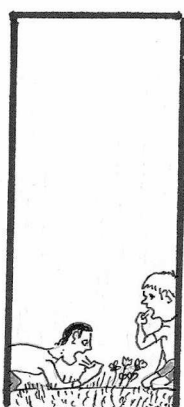
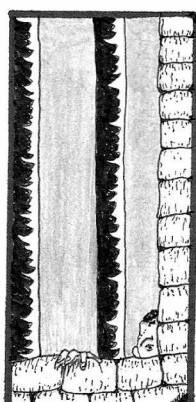
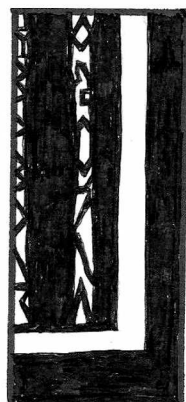
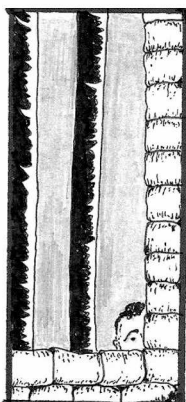
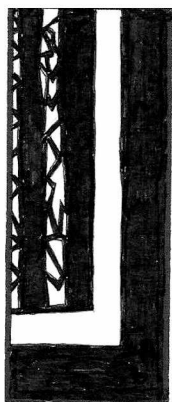
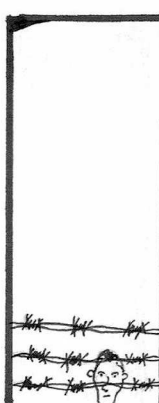
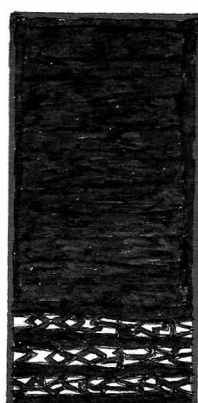
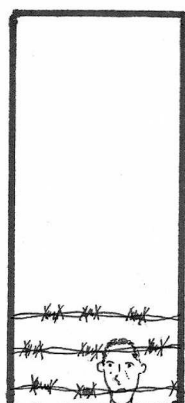
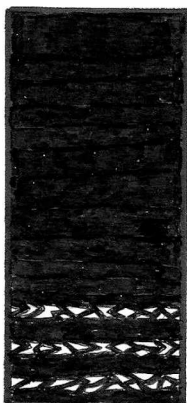
"Keep walking, bitch is dead!"

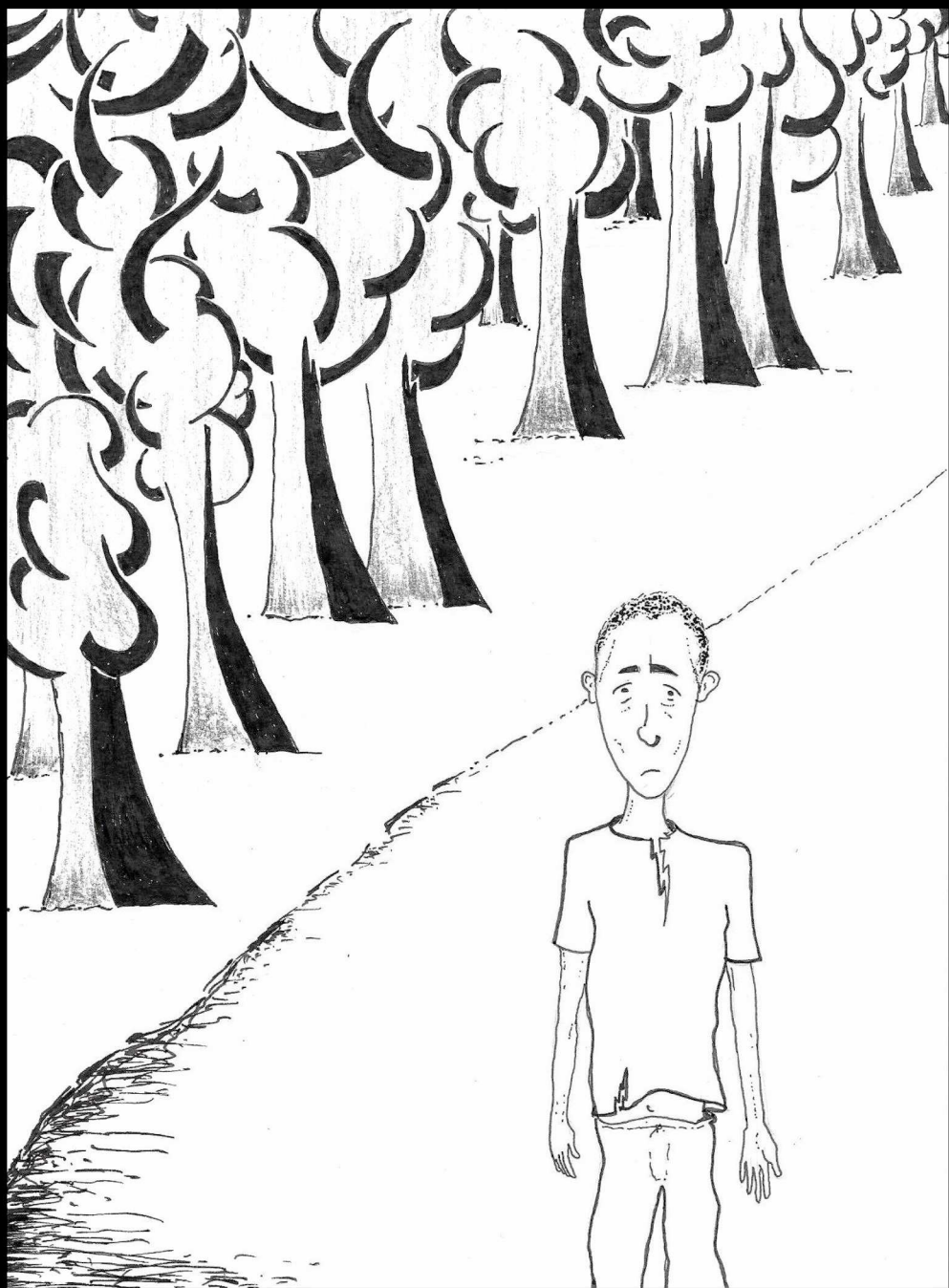
My name is Jelena Babić and I am alive.



Saved and left behind



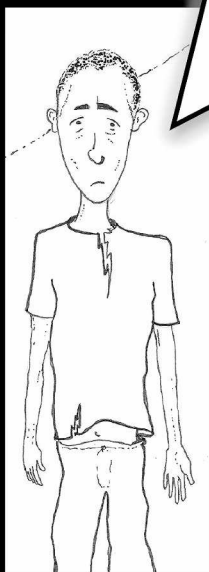


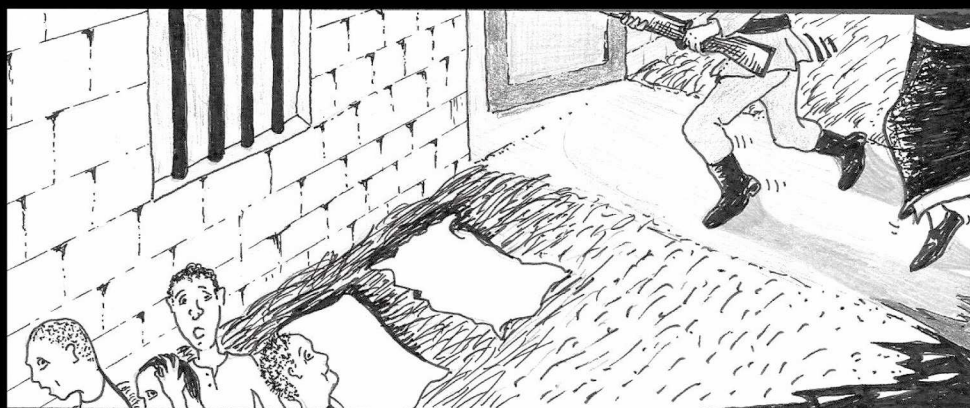
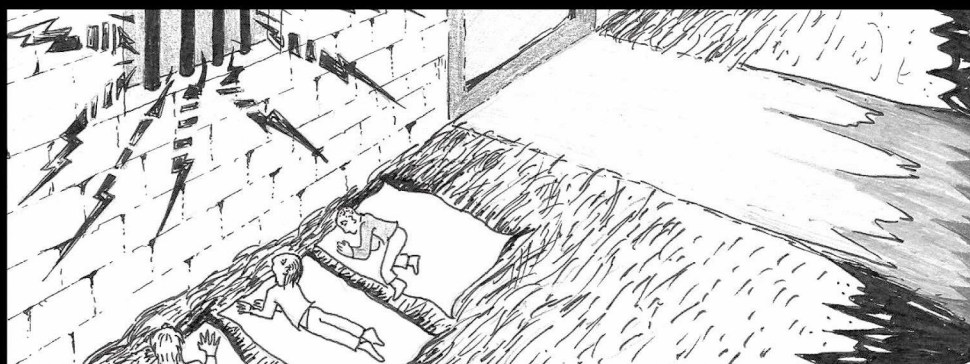


My name is Petar Babić from the village of Sovjak and I'm 9 years old.

I thought I was old enough to be a Partisan to fight the Ustaša, to save my brother, my mom, but that's not what Partisans thought.

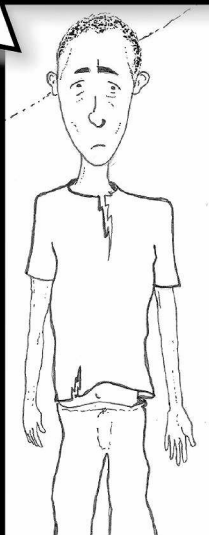
Damn you, bastards. They told me I was too little and too sick. Those other kids that came with me from Gradiška camp, lied that they are 11 years old and they took them. I guess I'm too skinny, too small, too tired.

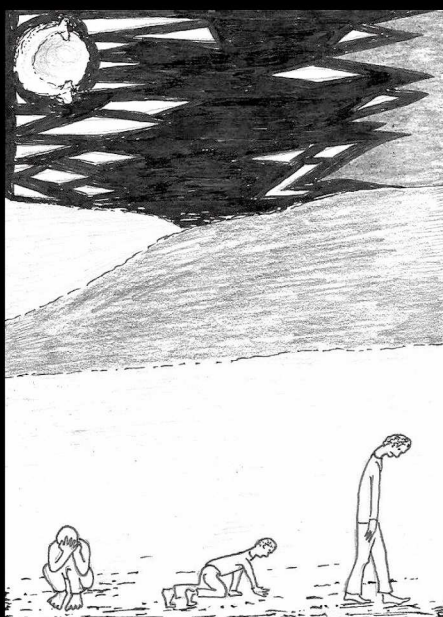
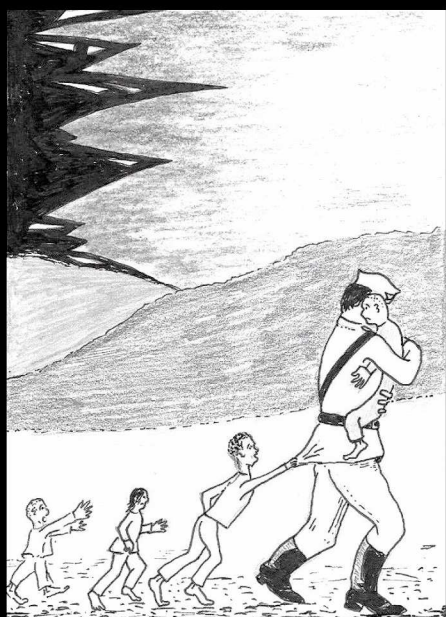
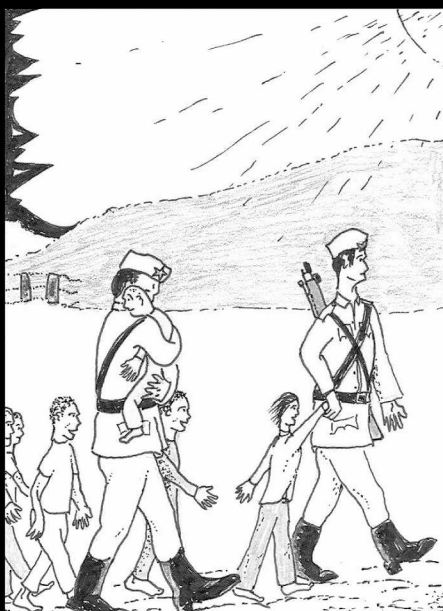
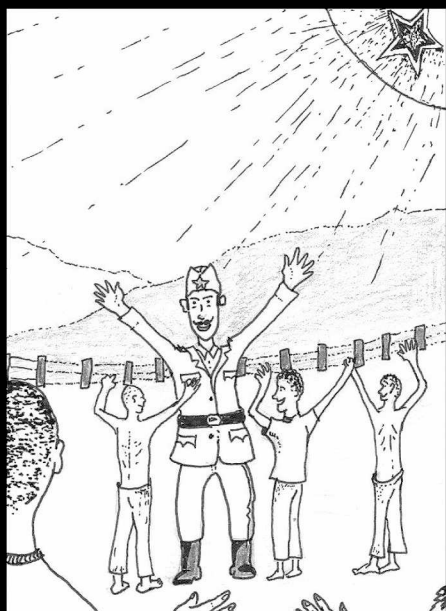




Yesterday, Partisans entered our camp. It was middle of the night. We were awakened by the gun shots. We huddled together scared. Couple of nuns and Croatian soldiers ran through our room. We were hunkered in the corner, avoiding to look at them and didn't want to make them angry as they really knew how to hurt us when they get angry. As soon as they left the room we heard gun shots. Are they dead? I hope so.

After a while, shooting stopped, door opened and a Partisan commander approached our cell. Large and loud fellow but someone that is smiling for a change. He said that his name was comrade Nikola. He told us that we are free and even before he stopped talking we scream out of happiness and run through the doors.





It was an amazing feeling to run around without a fear that soldiers are going to hurt you. As soon as we left the building we took off our hats with "U" signs and some of us even took their clothes off. Crazy kids. We laughed and danced together with Partisans. It was an awesome sight. Hundreds of kids and Partisans dancing, laughing and crying. Some kids fainted out of happiness, exhaustion. We had to get them up and laid them to bed. Happiness can be overwhelming. They also brought food. I've forgotten how it is to eat the actual food and not just some soldiers leftovers and grass from the ground. Real food... bread and milk.

Partisans told us that they crossed Kupa river, just the other day and surprised Ustašas. They also told us that our parents asked them to rescue us. When I've asked Partisans if they've heard about my mom and brothers, they told me that they didn't know. This worries me. After a while Partisans started to leave. They told us that they can't take little ones. Am I a little one? What does it mean "little one"? Older kids tagged along. Babies and "little ones" were left behind. I didn't want to be "little one", I tried and walked, pretended that I'm older. We started climbing a hill. Partisans were nervous they kept running back towards us at the end of the column urging us to hurry up, warning us that Ustašas are coming, but we couldn't, we just couldn't. Some kids just sat at the side of the trail. Confused, angry, crying.

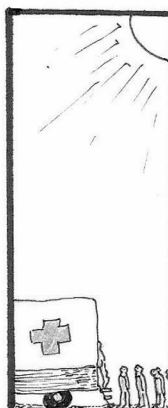
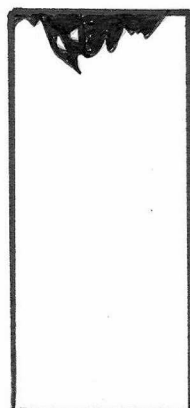
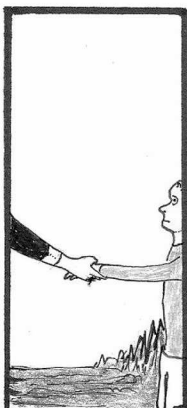
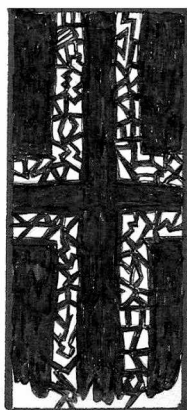
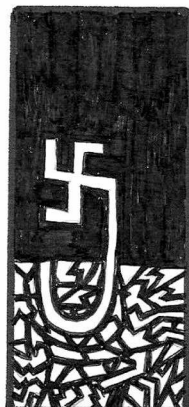
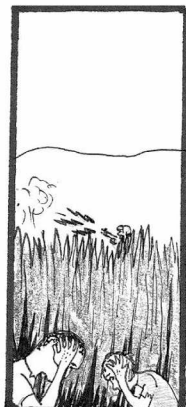
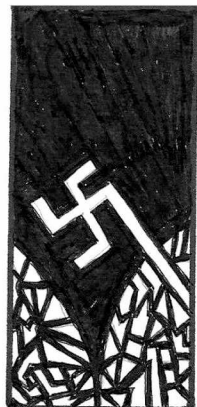
Partisans stopped coming back to make us hurry up. They just told us to go to the nearest village and villagers will take care of us. ...and then they were gone.

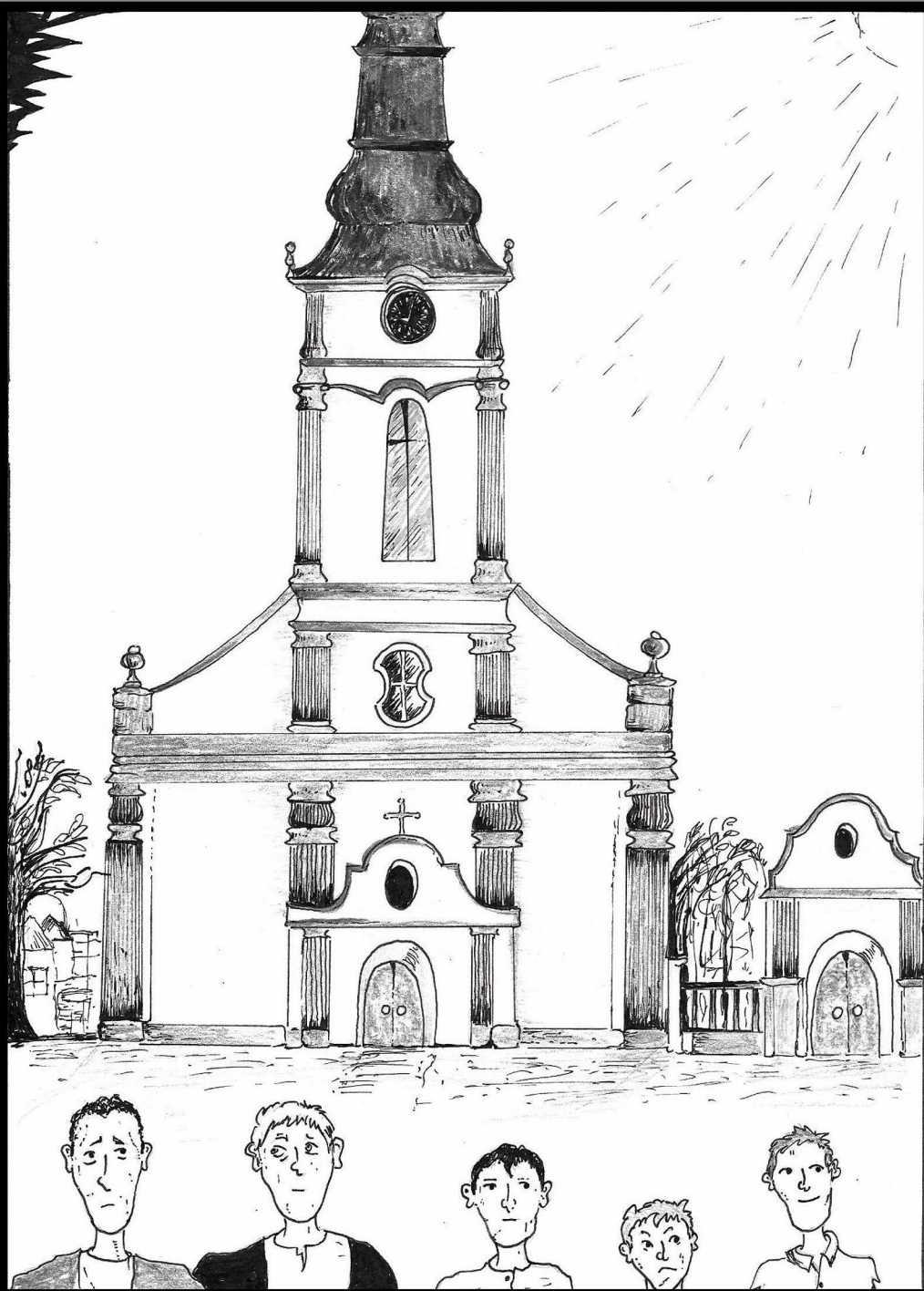
This morning I was happy.



What is
Adoption?







My name is Petar Babić from the village of Sovjak and I'm 10 years old.

Standing with other boys in the center of the town square of Stara Pazova and waiting to be taken away, or they used the word "adopted". What is "adopted"? I asked the driver of our truck. He said, "That is when nice people take you to their home, give you some food and let you sleep in bed".

Big white buildings around us, churches and lots of people, man, women and kids, nicely dressed kids are looking at us. Serious pretty faces. Some are smiling.





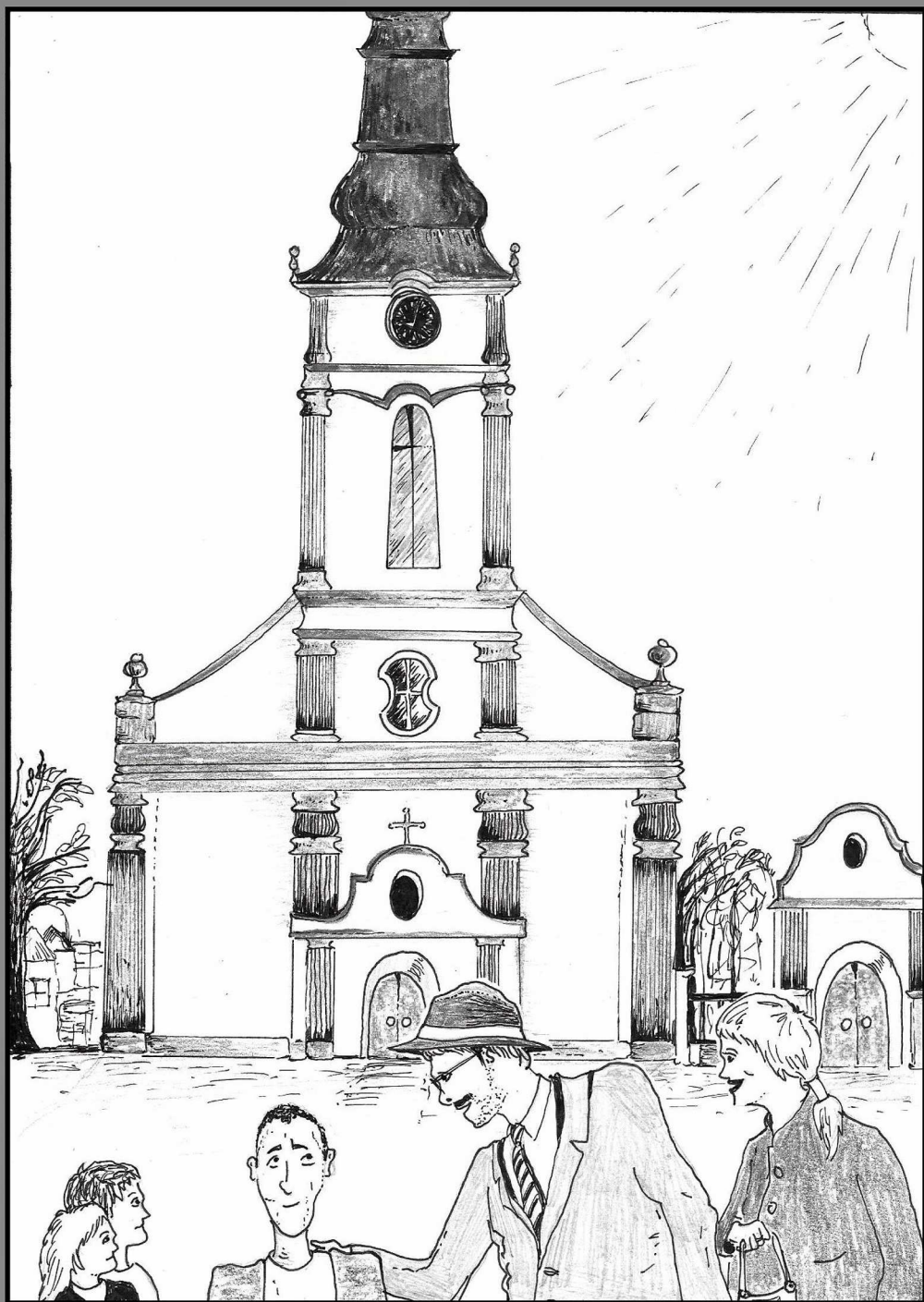
I'm skin and bones, with sores and blisters all over me, no one will ever pick me up. Well, maybe some doctor will have to, the way I see it.

After being left alone by Partisans we had been hiding in the forest for a while. We could see Ustašas in the distance shooting at anything that was moving. Screams of the kids that are being shot still live in my ears, my head, my heart and I can't get rid of it. We were finally found by nuns, oh no I thought at that time. Not them again.

However, these were nicer, they didn't beat us they gave us food. They belonged to some organization don't remember any more. After a while they told us that a lot of girls will be sent to Zagreb and Germany, wherever that is and that us boys will be going east.

They board us into the trucks, this time no shouting, no guns, no cries. Mister Kovačević, he told us is his name, took us in a truck and brought us here. Most of the kids were already taken by the locals. I was mostly looking at them, who is going where...





...and didn't notice a man, a women, a girl and a boy in front of me. It startled me a bit.

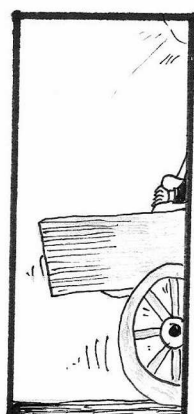
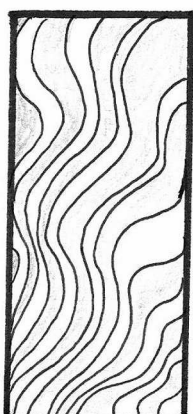
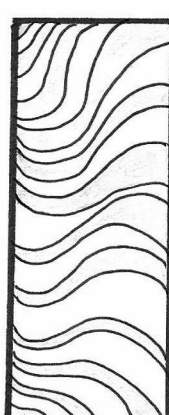
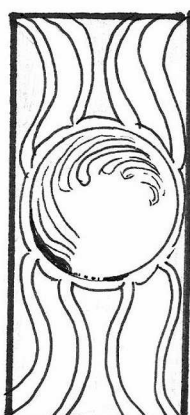
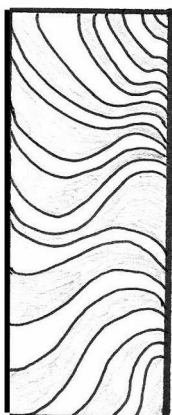
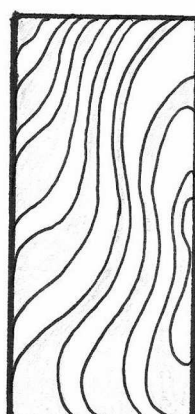
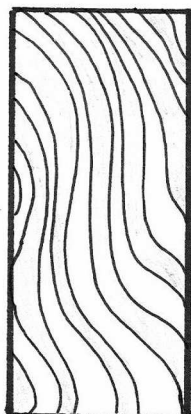
Man patted me on the back and said.

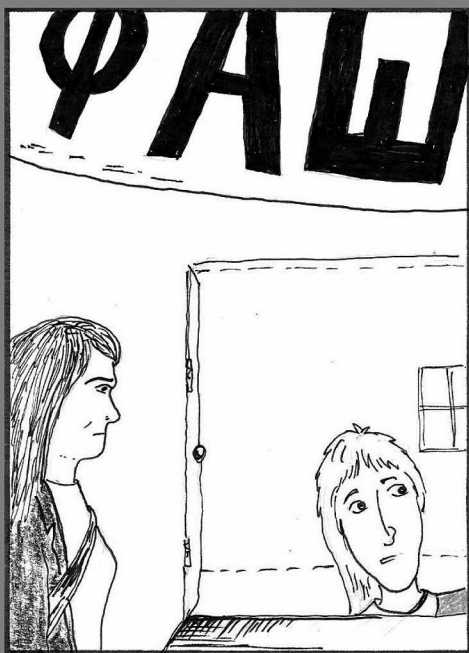
"You are coming with us. My name is Doctor Klašnja.
What is your name"?





13 year old boy

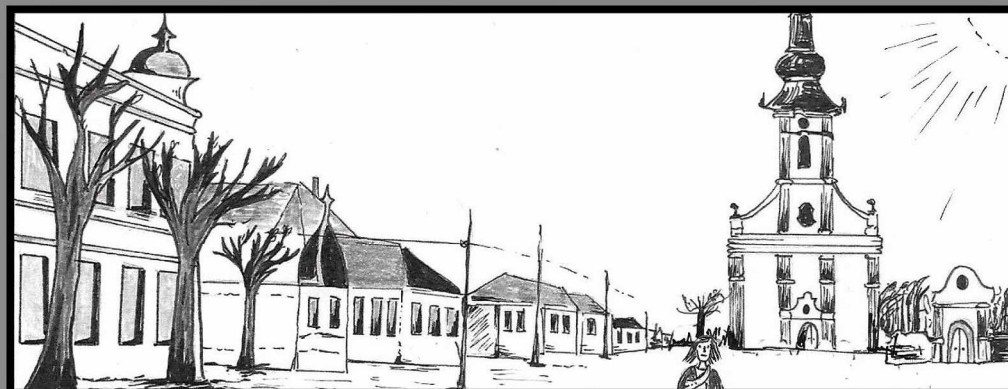
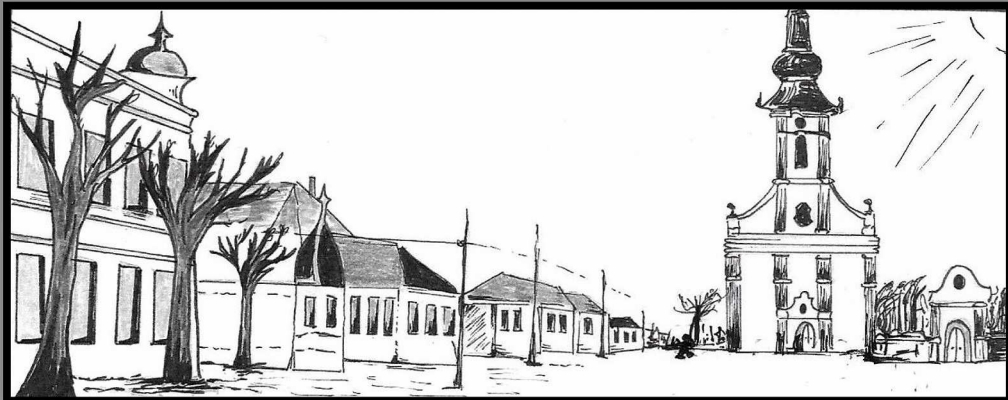




"My name is Jelena Babić from village of Sovjak in Kozara region. Here's my ID". I hand over my ID to the clerk over the counter. Blond woman in a real dress with the stern face. She looks at me suspiciously, probably as my clothes are all in rags and dirty from long trip. "How can I help you comrade?" she asks. I'm in the municipal office of the town of Stara Pazova, just North West from the capital of us Serbs, Belgrade. The war is over. Nazis and Ustašas are gone. I'm here to look for my son Petar. I've heard from Red Cross that he is here, adopted like other kids from Kozara region by a good family. ...How did I end up here?

Back in those horrible days, as I managed to avoid being taken to Jasenovac concentration camp I wandered through the forest. After walking for another couple of days through the forest and hiding from Ustašas I managed to stumble on a house. Nice Croatian family helped me with bread and milk and kind words. Kind words were better than food. Kind words gave me the strength to go back to Sovjak, to our village of Sovjak and look for my boys. Unfortunately I didn't have a strength to keep the little one in my tummy. I guess lack of food and torturous walk made me loose the little one. Let's not talk about sad things... I did find Stevan and Gojko alive and well. Petar is the only one remaining to be found. When the war was over and I approached Red Cross and found out a lots of names, familiar names of kids from our neighborhood. That's when I found that Petar was in Stara Pazova, more than 400 kilometers from Sovjak. Now, I have left Gojko and Stevan with cousins back in the village and hit the road to find Petar. After 2 weeks of walking, sharing a ride with generous folks and walking again I'm in Stara Pazova municipal office. Looking for my son Petar. I used to call him Pero. My dear Pero. Clerk tells me the address of Doctor Klašnja. ...wow he is a doctor. She gives me the direction where to go and shifted the look to the next person in line. For her I don't exist anymore. "Next"!





Short walk through nice neighborhood. Nice clean houses with clean yards, flowers, cars, trucks and fat, happy horses and dogs. I wonder if they've seen the war at all.

I also wonder how does 13 year old boy look like? I wondered about it for the last month since I heard the news from Red Cross.



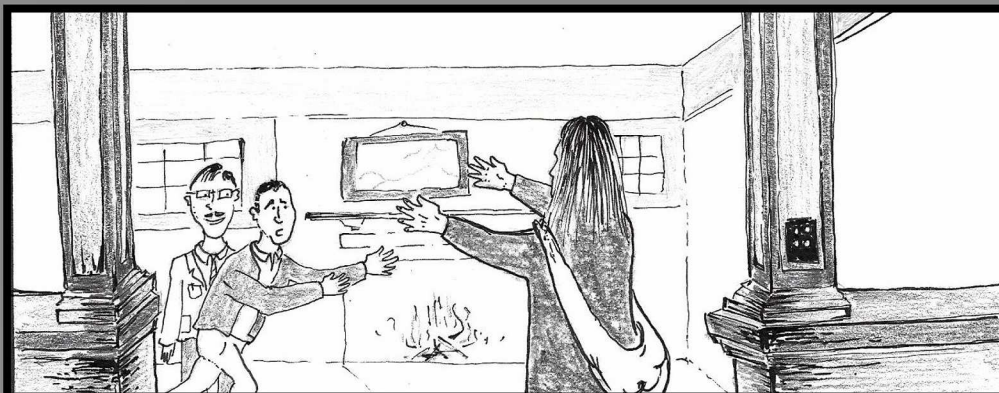
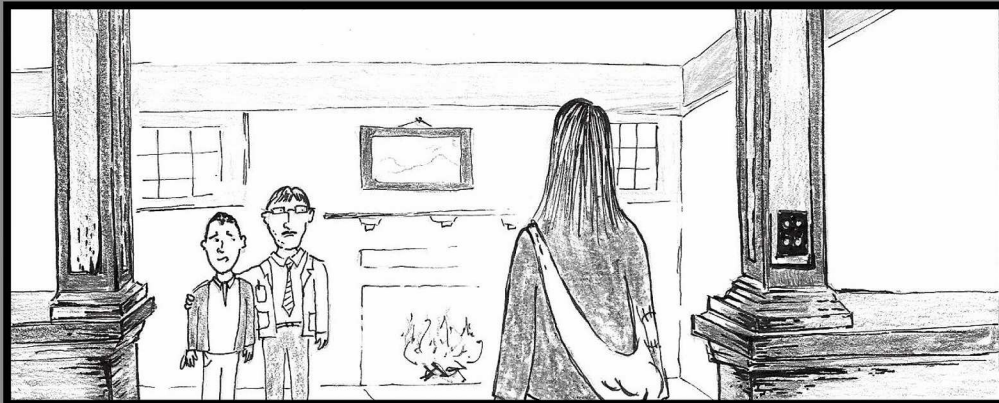


I knock on the door of Dr. Saša Klačnja's house. I knock again and again until I've heard someone walking. The door opens suddenly. Nice smell of cooked meat comes out of house.

Madame Doctor?

No, she is their maid. Maid tells me that Doctor is expecting me and he'll be right in. She invites me into the house. The room smells nice, ...smell of food.






After a few minutes of waiting a gentleman walks in. A handsome guy dressed in a suit and... and I think 13 year old boy.

The boy, the beautiful teenage boy in clean pants, socks and shoes, looks at me first and then looks at the doctor whispering quietly into his ear, hoping that I won't hear... "This is not my Mom, my Mom is clean and beautiful... this..." he stops. Look on his face almost scared, confused. He then looks back at me.

I start to cry, shaking, finally getting the answer I was asking myself for the last few week. So, that is how 13 year old boy looks like.

The boy stops whispering into doctor's ear and suddenly is rushing towards me.





My name is Petar
Babić from the
village of Sovjak.


My name is Jelena
Babić and I have
found my son.

He looks me in the eyes. I see that he is trying not to cry and gives me strong hug, almost knocks me down to floor and then whispers in my ear...

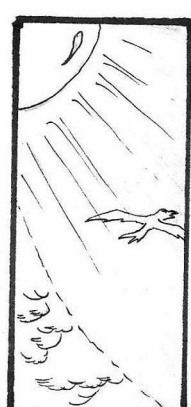
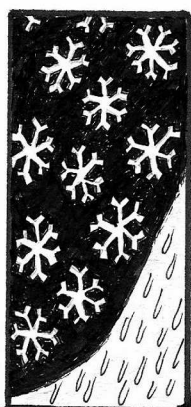
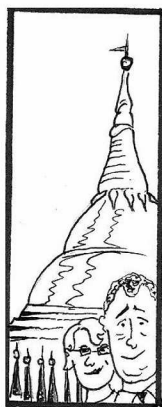
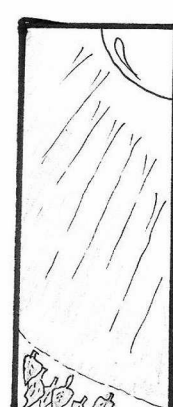
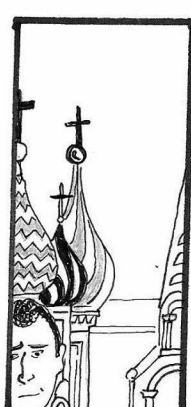
...My name is Petar Babić from the village of Sovjak."

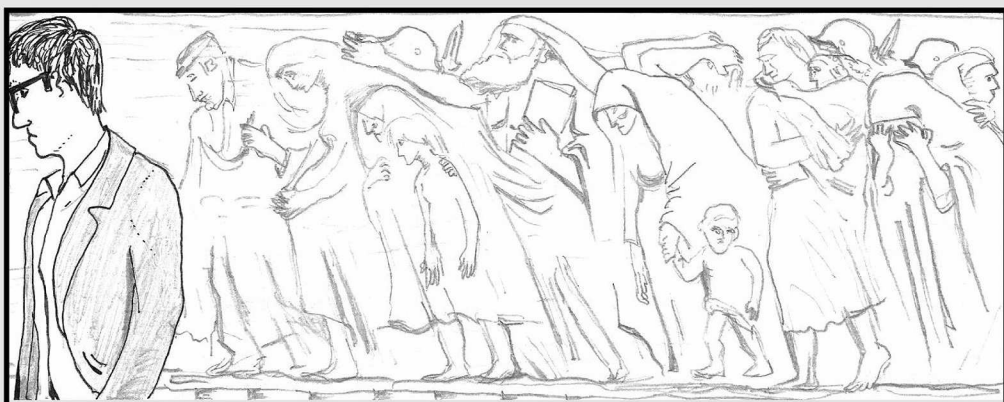
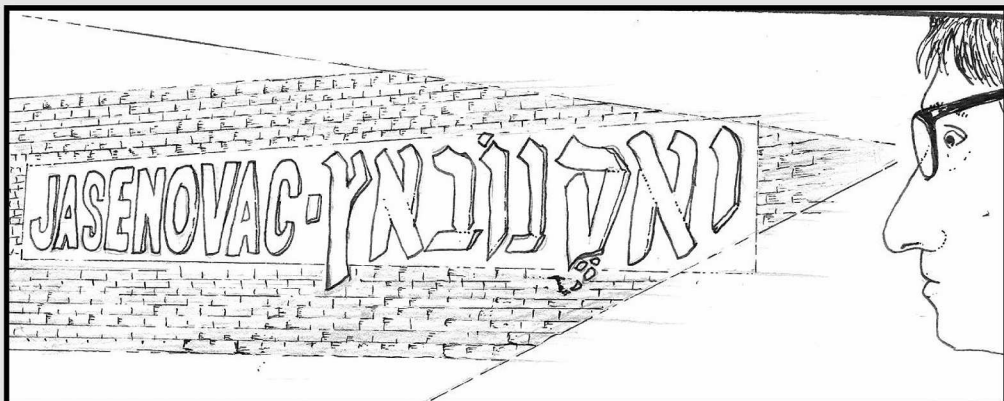
My name is Jelena Babić and I have found my son.





What to do with
the story?





Petar Babić had a good life. Studied philosophy, traveled the world, worked in publishing. He married beautiful woman from Belgrade Serbia whose name is Ivanka and they had 2 sons Saša and Miša. I'm one of these two boys.

My name is Aleksandar Saša Babić from Belgrade, Serbia.

It's 2014 and I'm in Jerusalem visiting Yad Vashem Memorial to Holocaust. Looking at the names of concentration camps I notice the name of Jasenovac, camp that my grandma Jelena managed to avoid. One of those horrible places that we Serbs share in our shared memory with Jewish people.

Just yesterday I've got an email from my daughter Izabel asking me to visit her high school in Snohomish, Washington where we live and talk about my grandma and my dad's story. It must be coincidence.

My grandma passed away in the 80's before I was old enough to have a meaningful conversation with her. My father Petar, passed away 1998 after a long fight with cancer. Even at the end of his life he never wanted to talk too much about his experience during 2nd World War. It was too painful for him. Would he want me to tell the story?

Should I do it?

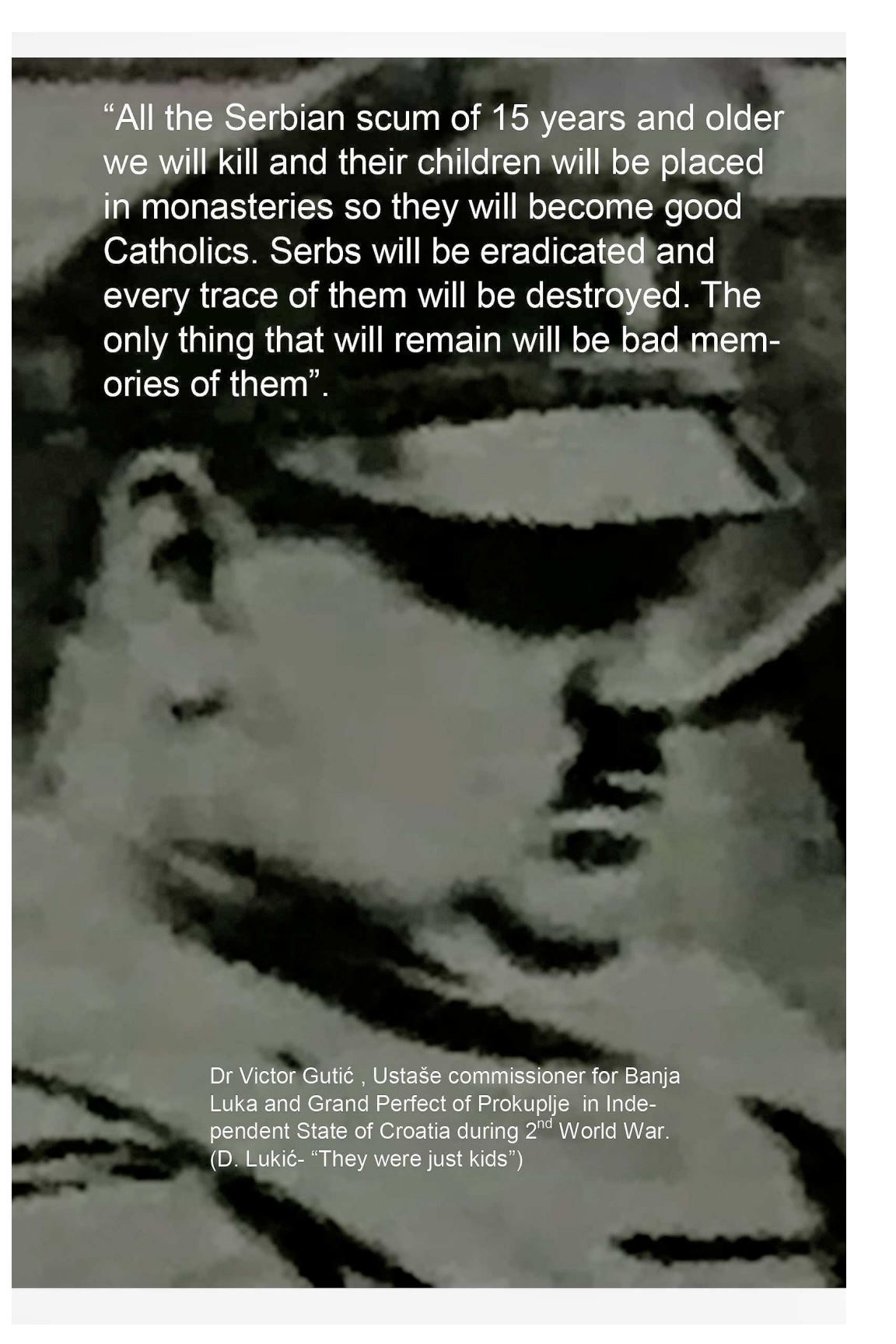
How can I not.





Being a junior in high school in the city of Snohomish, isn't the most entertaining thing in the world. You're sort of in an in-between stage, not at the top, and not at the bottom. We all have had our favorite classes in school that stay with us forever. Personally, my favorite was history. I loved educating myself on historical context and how it can help you develop your own views and opinions. One day in class, my teacher let us know that we would be having a World War II forum. We'd have veterans come and speak to groups of students the library about their own personal stories involving the war. Sadly, many of the veterans that usually would attend the forum had grown extremely weak or had passed away due to old age. The history teachers were scrambling for new speakers. We were told that if anyone had a relative or friend that could speak about their personal connection to the war that we should have them come in. I automatically thought of my dad. He had an amazing story, but I was worried that the teachers wanted someone that had actually experienced the war first hand. My dad's story is not about him, it's about his father and grandma. I talked to my dad about it, and he agreed. He seemed hesitant at first to agree to it, but in the end he said yes. My teacher was very excited to have someone come share a story that wasn't on the fighting side of things. When it came time for my dad to share the story, I sat near the back and listened. I paid attention, but mostly watched the faces of my peers around me. They started off looking dazed, tired, and not interested. With time the story began to peak their interest. Some parts of the story caused the girls to grow intrigued and emotional. But in others, the boys' eyes would widen or mouths hang open slightly with shock. I'd never seen rowdy teenage boys so intrigued by the topic that wasn't something on an iPhone screen. I loved listening to all the questions they asked once my dad's story was over. In the end, I'm so glad I told my dad about this opportunity. It really awoke something inside him, which made him want to share his dad's and grandmas remarkable story to the world. I then realized that this story actually is about my Dad. I also realized that the story is about my Dad's brother Miša and his kids Pavle, Luka, Dušan, all the mothers in our lives Lya, Mira, Ivanka, Danče, Katarina, Marija, Patricia... This story is also about me. My name is Izabel Babić from Snohomish.





“All the Serbian scum of 15 years and older we will kill and their children will be placed in monasteries so they will become good Catholics. Serbs will be eradicated and every trace of them will be destroyed. The only thing that will remain will be bad memories of them”.

Dr Victor Gutić , Ustaše commissioner for Banja Luka and Grand Perfect of Prokuplje in Independent State of Croatia during 2nd World War.
(D. Lukić- “They were just kids”)

What was that all about?

It is never good to find yourself on the crossroads of turbulent history especially if you are an 8 year old kid without the power to extract yourself from all that nightmare and continue with normal things that you are used to...like kids life, playing, going to school.

Being a Serbian kid in Kozara region in north western Bosnia during the 2nd world war was a nightmare.

After the German invasion of former Yugoslavia in April of 1941, Nazis helped Croatian Fascists establish an Independent State of Croatia that consisted of most of modern-day Croatia and Bosnia, together with some parts of modern-day Serbia. That horrible regime formed a copycat of Nazi Germany, performing large-scale genocide campaign in places such as the Jasenovac and other concentration camps.

Prosecution was spearheaded by Ustaša movement whose ideology was a poisonous mix of fascism, Roman Catholicism and Croatian nationalism. The movement emphasized the need for a "pure" Croatia and promoted genocide against Orthodox Christian Serbs, Jews and Roma people, and persecution of Croatian antifascists.

Region around Kozara Mountain populated mainly by Serbs and located in the center of that newly formed state created prime target for Ustašas and also emerged as one of the centers for Partisan antifascist movement in former Yugoslavia. Partisans that fought against Nazi Germany, Italian and Croatian Fascist states found Kozara region natural source of fighting force as population of that region was literally fighting for its own survival.



Ustaše executing people over a mass grave near Jasenovac and head cutting near village of Grahovac

Partisans fought Ustaša regime and attempted to save people and kids from some of the camps like in my Dad's case. The final liberation came in 1945 when 2nd World War was over and Nazis were defeated.

Ustaša were mainly captured, tried for war crimes and executed like Dr. Gutić whom I reference at the start of this section. Others like leader of that murderous state Ante Pavelić managed to escape and found refuge in fascist regimes in Latin America.

During the war in the system of concentration camps hundreds of thousands of people died. Thousands of kids suffered and some died in the camps. A few camps like the ones in Gradiška and Jastrebarsko where my Dad was placed and Sisak and others were setup mostly for children of Serbian parents from Kozara region and other places in Croatia. Parents were either killed on the spot or shipped to larger system of camps to be executed.



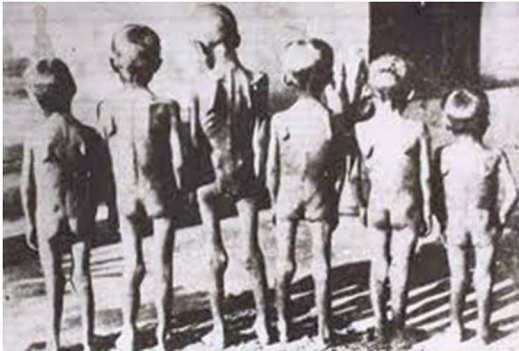
Boys from Jastrebarsko camp wearing Ustaša hats;



Kids and Nuns in Jastrebarsko camp

My Dad and Grandma's stories are unfortunately not unique. Many more people even in my own family from Kozara region went through the same nightmare. Some survived to tell their story and many unfortunately did not. When I was first contemplating to write this story I would get very emotional to think what would my Dad and Grandma Jelena actually say at that time when he was just a kid and she was a women who thought that she is about to die. The story had to actually be an interview of Peter and Jelena at the time when the things were happening.

Drawing a graphic novel made it even harder. It is horrible for me being a parent myself to



Group of boys from Gradiška Camp July 1942;



Group of Girls from Jastrebarsko 1942

be looking at the images of little emaciated kids that actually looked like old people. After I went to my daughter's school first time to tell this story I received many thank you notices and letters.

Some of those letters had drawings made by high school kids describing basically how the kids from the school understood my story. Those drawings made me think about a graphic novel format.

I grew up in Belgrade Serbia, born in 1965, 20 years after the war was over. Knowledge of 2nd world war was something I've learned in school. My Dad was never very eager to talk about this. I heard about it occasionally from other family members but almost as a side story and note to me to know that my Dad had a hard childhood and I should be grateful as my childhood is much better. I guess lot of kids hear that anywhere in the world so it wasn't hard to disregard that story and continue with my everyday self-absorbed kids' life.

Eventually this story and more importantly emotions behind it came to me from other direction. As a mischievous kid I had a bad habit of occasionally opening my parent's mail to spy on them. I would open the letter carefully, read it and after that close it so it looks like it has never been opened.

One of the letters I opened was from Society of the surviving children from Kozara region inviting him to an annual gathering. I remember being proud of my father. When I asked him about it what came out of him was not what I expected.

Emotions of fear, anger, shame. Fear of 8th year old kid being taken from his Mom, anger that he was too young to fight back, shame of being weak and physically sick so Partisans wouldn't take him and repeated shame and fear that because he was sick, he would not be adopted.

Through these emotions He expressed complete rejection that suffering can be celebrated even as a path towards victory against evil. He did not want to participate in any of the public events and memorial gatherings. He had his own memorials in his own head and his own heart. I respected that.



Monument at Mrakovica dedicated to Kozara victims by architect Dušan Džamonja



Monument "Wounded Bird" by Tone Svetina dedicated to children of Kozara region

Creating this book I have tried to look into my Dad's heart and soul and keep the story alive for the future generations.

To honor the victims we can do it in many ways. Through monuments, music, stories, prayers ...silence.

I have tried with this book.

I

Images: Nacionalni Park Kozara npkozara.com. ,Dalibor Čolić; Dečiji Ustaški Koncentracioni Logor Jastrebarsko by Rade Milosavljević;

Notes: Drawings from "What to do with the story" chapter is based on artwork from Yad Vashem Memorial.

Aleksandar Saša Babić lives in Snohomish, Washington. He draws, paints and writes stories about different events, places and people.

